CHAPTER 2: THE ORIGINAL SOUTHLANDERS

Everybody knows that Indians lived in the United States before the white people came from Europe. Most people though have a very inaccurate idea of how the first Americans looked, worked, played and lived.

Perhaps the main reason so many people today have very silly ideas about Indians is because TV shows and movies, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, portrayed Indians not as they really were, but as the producers of TV shows and movies thought Indians should have been, so they would best entertain the audience.

These early TV shows and movies helped create a stereotype, which is often a silly exaggeration of how people really are or were. Look at the photos on this page and discuss with your classmates the stereotypes that you might have seen about Indians. Think about some of the sports teams that you might have seen on television or at a stadium. How do you think Indians like the way they are portrayed on TV?

Although Southern California’s Indians did not look and behave the way Hollywood’s movie makers might have liked, the groups of Indians that did live in the Southland were very successful and in many respects remain successful today.
Where Did the Indians Live in Southern California?

Four major Indian groups lived in Southern California: Chumah, Tongva (Gabrieleno), Luiseno, and Serrano. You could tell them apart mostly by the different languages they spoke. Within those four main groups were several subgroups, who also spoke differently than their “cousins” within their language group.

The Chumash were the largest group of Indians in the area, occupying much of the coastal lands from what is today Malibu all the way to present day San Luis Obispo, 200 miles away. The Chumash were actually several subgroups who spoke slightly different versions of the Chumash language. The Chumash subgroup that dominated Ventura County was called the Ventureño by the Spanish. The Emigdiano Chumash subgroup lived in the mountains of what is today Ventura County. The Island Chumash lived on San Miguel, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and Anacapa Islands. Nobody speaks in the Chumash language today; it is extinct.

The Tongva people, who are also frequently called “Gabrieleno”, occupied much of what is now Los Angeles County, plus about half of Orange County. They too had numerous sub-cultures. In the Los Angeles Basin and on Santa Catalina Island the Gabrieleno band of Tongvans were most populous. In the western San Fernando Valley, the Fernandeño group was dominant.

The northern parts of L.A. County was dominated by Serrano Indians. The Kitanemuk (Tataviam) Tribe lived around Lancaster. The Allikik Serranos lived north of Santa Clarita and the main group of Serranos lived mostly to the South and East of Palmdale. The Juaneño people lived in much of the area that is now Orange County except in the southern and mountainous areas where the Luiseno were dominant. Both of these groups were part of a larger group called Cahuillas.
How did Local Indians Use the Land?

No one really knows how many people were in either tribe, but some estimate that there were about 15,000 Chumash and 5,000 Tongvan people at their peak. While that’s very small by today’s standards, it was a lot for back then. One of the reasons why the local Indian population was so large and was that the local climate provided lots of healthy, nutritious food. The diverse local geography helped create so many subgroups.

One of things that we admire most about American Indian culture is the way they lived in harmony with the nature. As Californians seek to become more “green” by reducing the damage we do to our environment, we can draw some inspiration from the Chumash and the Tongva people who were healthy, prosperous and peaceful.

One of the reasons for the success of the first southern Californians was the outstanding natural resources and mild climate of the region. Before the Spanish arrived, the Tongvans and Chumash were both hunter-gatherer tribes, which meant that they collected their food and other supplies as they needed it and by traveling around, picking fruits, collecting acorns, fishing and hunting. They were not farmers. Luckily for the Tongva and Chumash, the local environment provided a lot of food and a wide variety of things to eat. Variety is important because not only do most people get bored with eating the same thing all the time, variety provides for better nutrition and a healthier, larger population.
The staple, or main food of the local Indians was the acorn. They didn’t eat acorns, but they did smash them up and after washing away the bitter parts with water, used the remaining flour to make dough for bread or for a hot cereal, like oatmeal. Acorns were great because they provided a lot of carbohydrates for energy, they did not rot or spoil easily, and they were very plentiful.

Other important plants gathered by local Indians include sage, prickly pear cactus, Indian lettuce, wild oats, yucca, grapes and other berries. Father Junipero Serra, wrote in July 1769, “We found vines, wild of a large size and in some cases quite loaded with grapes. We have seen Indians in immense numbers.... They continue to make a good subsistence from various seeds and by fishing.” Wild oats and various other grasses were harvested for their grain” (Nyerges http://www.aaaim.com/echo/v4n2/v4n2WildFoods.htm 9/10/2008)

The local Indians were also skilled hunters. They would eat deer, squirrels, rabbits, quail and other animals, including some snakes. Reputedly, bears, eagles and owls were not hunted because for some, the bear had special magical qualities. Insects were also eaten, sometime after being roasted over a fire like a marshmallow. Have you ever eaten an insect? To many people around the world, eating bugs is not “gross” at all, but a real treat.

Fishing was also very important. Fish provide are an excellent source of protein, necessary for strong bones and good muscle development. Fish were caught in nets and with spears and fishing hooks made of bone. Some fishing was done in the Pacific Ocean and the local lagoons. Others fished in local rivers and pools. Where the water was not flowing rapidly, the local Indians used homemade poisons made from local nuts like the California Buckeye to catch fish. They would grind up the nuts and toss the pieces into the water to make the fish float to the top, where they could be gathered for dinner.

Other uses of nature

In addition to food, the natural environment also provided the Chumash and Tongva peoples resources for clothing, shelter and tools.

The Chumash and Tongva Indians used local materials to build amazing canoes that could be paddled far out into the ocean. Made of large wooden planks, tied together with waxed milkweed twine and glued together with tar and pine pitch, and covered with shark skin, the local Indians could travel out to the Channel Islands and fish for deep sea fish. Can you think of where the local Indians may have gotten the tar to build canoes?

(Alternate: The Chumash Indians used local materials to build amazing, 20-foot long canoes that could be paddled far out into the ocean. Building a canoe, which the Chumash called a tomol, was an elaborate process that required a great deal of skill. First they collected driftwood logs of pine, fir or redwood from which they
cut planks with whalebone and stone tools. To make the planks curve they were soaked for hours in clay-lined pits filled with boiling water. When the planks were ready, the canoe makers tied them together with waxed milkweed twine. Then they filled the holes and cracks with tar and pine pitch. (Can you think of where local Indians may have gotten the tar?) Lastly, the Indians decorated the canoes with paint and shells. With these canoes the Chumash could travel to the Channel Islands and fish for swordfish, tuna and other deep sea fish.)

The Chumash canoes were so sophisticated that they have been called the greatest invention of the California Indians. According to one theory, however, they were actually invented by Polynesians who may have visited southern California (from Hawaii) over a thousand years ago. Scientists are still debating whether or not this theory is correct.

Highly skilled in bone, shell and stone.
Chumash basket making is outstanding...probably indicates that there was a good bit of wealth...because of the free time necessary to reach this level of craftsmanship.

Chumash and Tongvans were skilled boatsmen and constructors of boats, could actually use their boats in rough ocean waters...which is a skill most other Native Americans did not display. Used boats for trading and whaling. xx

The Chumash had a very active economy and traded the things they made and gathered with other Indians from both nearby and distant lands.

The Chumash may have used beads much as we do dollar bills. What is for sure is that the Chumash were skilled at making beads from a variety of seashells. They traded these beads, among other things, for stuff they could not easily get in Southern California. Chumash beads have been found by archeologist many hundreds of miles from Southern California.

Beads may have also played a role in other parts of the Chumash lives. The persons or family who controlled access to the bead may have become wealthier than others who could not manufacture beads. The control of this natural resource may have led to the development of a more complex social structure than other Indians groups developed.

Beads were also often buried with people when they died.

Some of these were purely decorative as represented by various finished and unfinished shell ornaments, but the remainder were utilitarian objects of bone and shell and included bone awls, gouges, many chips of stone, and nine rocks of no apparent use, as well as three lower jaws of the Island fox. There was also one asphalt basket mold. Among the bone tools were some twenty-three large tools made from whale ribs and are the general type known from Gifford as "D". Some of these reached a length of five feet and graded down to the normal sizes of abalone prize bars, but the entire collection
much resembled a disassembled set of automobile springs, and the strange assortment of "junk" as well as the man's tremendous size, which is well over six feet, suggesting the name "Village Blacksmith" for this ancient workman [Orr 1968:143-144]. http://www.californiaprehistory.com/reports01/rep0018.html

customs, and various folklore traditions.
Had their own religion

Contact with Spanish.

None of the local Indians had much contact with Europeans until Spanish missionaries arrived in the mid 18th century. Some put up a resistance to the Europeans, while many began working for the missions (note: you will learn much more about missions in 4th grade), mostly in farming. With the arrival of the Europeans, the lifestyles of the local Native Americans changed dramatically.

The Spanish missionaries introduced agriculture to the area and most Indians became more sedentary, by living in the same place much longer than they did before. Many Native Americans also gave up their own belief system and began practicing Roman Catholicism.

Diseases like small pox and influenza killed almost all of the Chumash. By 1900 there was only about 200 Chumash Indians alive in California. 5000 today?

There are still many descendents of both the Chumash and Tongva living in Southern California Perhaps as many as 5,000. Some of the remaining members of this tribe have built casinos to raise money for their group. There are casinos in nearby counties, but none yet in Los Angeles, Ventura or Orange Counties.

Some local place names with Tongvan origins include: Pacoima, Tujunga, Topanga and Rancho Cucamonga. Modern place names with Chumash origins include: Malibu, Ojai, Lompoc, Simi Valley, and Point Mugu. 1500 tongvans today.